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THE OPERATIONS OF COMPANY B, 142D INFANTRY
(36TH INFANTRY DIVISION) AT THE SIEGFRIED
LINE, WISSEMBOURG-DORRENBACH AREA - 19-22
MARCH, 1945

(RHINELAND CAMPAIGN)
(Personal Experience of a Company Commander)

Type of operation described: INFANTRY COMPANY
ATTACKING FORTIFIED POSITIONS

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

	<u>PAGE</u>
Index	1
Bibliography	2
Introduction	3
The General Situation	4
The March From Wissembourg To The Siegfried Line	7
The Attack on Ober-Otterbach	9
20 March, 1945 At Ober-Otterbach	16
Climbing To The Third Battalion	17
The Attack Into Dorrenbach	25
Analysis and Criticism	27
Lessons	30
Map A - The Saar Palatinate	
Map B - VI Corps Section of Undertone	
Map C - Wissembourg to Siegfried Line	
Map D - First Attack on Siegfried	
Map E - Crashing The Siegfried	

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INTRODUCTION

This monograph covers the operations of Company B, 142d Infantry, 36th Division at the Siegfried Line, Wissembourg-Dorrenbach area, 19-22 March, 1945, during the Battle of the Saar Palatinate.

To give the reader an appreciation of the picture, the condition and strength of the troops involved, it will be necessary to portray in a brief manner, some of the events prior to this action.

After a long and bitter winter in the Vosges Mountains, on the 15th of March, 1945, the Seventh United States Army was on the borders of Germany and the Saar Palatinate, the second richest industrial area within the German Reich. (1) (See Map A)

The 36th Infantry Division had landed at Southern France on the 15th August, 1944 as an assault Division of the Seventh Army and had participated through all of the Seventh Army operations from the Riveria beaches to the Rhine. It was considered an "old combat Division", with eleven months of combat in Italy and eight months in France up to the time of the Wissembourg-Dorrenbach operation. The Division was originally the Texas National Guard Division and although it now had very few texans left, the spirit was still there. (2)

The 36th Division crossed the Moder River on the 15th March 1945 in the first phase of "Operation Undertone" and pursued the Germans for more than 30 miles through delaying actions and rough

(1) A-1, p. 693; (2) A-3.

terrain to the City of Wissembourg, France. Here the Germans were to make their last outpost before the Siegfried Line. (3) (See Map A)

THE GENERAL SITUATION

The Saar Palatinate made a triangle which extended into the American Third and Seventh Army Lines. It was the only sector remaining West of the Rhine River that was of any importance industrially to the Germans, therefore it was necessary to give it immediate attention as soon as the troops could be made available to eliminate it. (4) (See Map A)

The Saar Palatinate is bounded on the East by the Rhine River; the North by the Moselle River and the South by the Lauter-Sarre River. It has four important terrain features: The Rhine Valley, the Hardt Mountains, the Saarbruecken-Kaiserslautern---Worms Corridor and the Hunsruck Mountains. The main communication route was the North-South Highway, running from Haguenau through Wissembourg and Landau at the foot of the Hardt Mountains. This was to be the axis of advance of the 36th Division. (5) (See Map A)

The Seventh Army had made advances into the City of Wissembourg in December 1945, but due to the lack of troops and the German counterattacks, it had been forced to withdraw in January and form a line running from just East of Haguenau to a point North of Saarbruecken where it joined the Third Army. (See Map A). The initial phase of "Operation Undertone" was to be carried on over familiar ground to the Seventh Army. (6)

The Germans were not in a good position; the advances of the First and Ninth American Armies to the North had caused them to shift (3) A-3; (4) A-1, p. 693; (5) A-1, p. 693, p. 712; (6) A-2, p. 476, A-1, p. 698.

troops from the Saar Palatinate to the North, without getting any troops in return. While the Germans were losing troops, the Americans were gaining. The Seventh U. S. Army now had a total of eleven Infantry Divisions and three Armored Divisions, while it was reported by Seventh Army G-2, "the enemy probably will not exceed nine divisions made up of 18 to 20 battalions of infantry with some 150 to 160 armored vehicles, mostly self-propelled guns". (7)

The Third U. S. Army sitting on the Moselle River poised to strike was threatening the North of the Palatinate. If a breakthrough were made by the Third U. S. Army, the Germans to the south would be threatened by an attack from the rear and if a breakthrough were made by the Seventh U. S. Army, the Germans to the North would also be threatened by an attack from the rear. The Germans were in a position to be cut off and maybe surrounded in the pocket. There were both suitable terrain for a defensive and some indications that the Germans might try to hang on.

In accordance with this concept, the plan for "Operation Undertone" was conceived. There had been two other plans written and discussed, but because of lack of troops and developments in the north, the plans had to be rewritten and renamed. It was to be a coordinated attack with Third U. S. Army, the First French Army and Seventh U. S. Army. Sixth U. S. Army Group had been granted permission to coordinate the movement of the Third U. S. Army, south of the Moselle. The First French Army was to attack parallel to the east of the Rhine River, the Third U. S. Army was to attack from the northwest and the Seventh Army to attack from the southwest, all with the mission of clearing the west bank of the Rhine, destroying the enemy and establishing a bridgehead across the Rhine. Speed was to be a vital factor in the

(7) A-1, p. 696.

operation if success was to be achieved. (8)

The operation was to be supported by air from the XII Tactical Air Command. (9)

The VI Corps was to be the right Corps of Seventh U. S. Army. It was to have the Third Algerian Infantry Division, 103d Infantry Division, 42d Infantry Division, 36th Infantry Division and the 14th Armored Division in Corps reserve. (10) (See Map B). The mission of the VI Corps was: To attack on D Day, secure the Bitché-Haguenau road, continue the attack and penetrate the Siegfried Line. It was to assist the advance of XV Corps, capture Landau and Neustadt and destroy the enemy in zone. (11)

The 36th Division was to attack in the Haguenau area (See Map B). Its mission was to secure the Haguenau-Wissenbourg highway for a supply route for the VI Corps; penetrate the Siegfried Line and continue to seize Landau. The 36th German Infantry Division was defending this area, thus the attack was to be the American 36th Infantry Division versus the German 36th Infantry Division. (12)

After a two day battle, the 142d Infantry secured the town of Mertzwiller and became division reserve. The 143d Infantry made a left flank envelopment and passed ahead of the 142d Infantry and moved on into Dieffenbach. (13) (See Map B)

The Division pushed on and on the morning of 19 March, the 1st and 2d Battalions of the 142d Infantry seized Wissenbourg after sporadic encounters. (14)

The men of Company B, 142d Infantry were tired as they had been the leading Company of the Battalion since the jumpoff. Casualties were being felt; five men were killed and twelve wounded, including

(8) A-1, p. 698; (9) A-1, p. 699; (10) A-1, p. 699, p. 947; (11) A-1, p. 948; (12) A-3; (13) A-1, p. 711; (14) A-1, p. 713.

the 1st platoon leader in the last three days. The Company had lost about ten men due to the long marches and from combat fatigue, thus the company was down to about eighty percent in strength. (15)

The Division planned to attack north from Wissembourg with 141st Infantry on the right of the Wissembourg-Bergzabern road and the 142d on the left with the road inclusive. The 143d Infantry was in Division reserve. (16)

On the afternoon of 19 March, 1945, the 142d Infantry moved out of Wissembourg on foot, preceded by a platoon from the 36th Reconnaissance Troop. The 1st Battalion moved directly north on the Bergzabern - Wissembourg highway and the 2d Battalion to the left on a cross-country route. The 3d Battalion was to move into Wissembourg and remain in Regimental reserve. The Regiment planned to pursue the Germans to the Siegfried Line and if possible, effect a surprise attack immediately with 1st and 2d Battalions to breach the Line. There was a platoon of tanks attached to the 1st Battalion from the 753d Tank Battalion. (17) (See Map C)

THE MARCH FROM WISSEMBOURG TO THE SIEGFRIED LINE

The 1st Battalion Commander, Lieutenant Colonel James L. Minor, issued an order on 19 March at Wissembourg; it's contents were: "It is not believed the Siegfried Line is manned in great strength. We are to move out as soon as possible, north up the highway until contact is made. Let your men march as light as possible; keep your carriers in the column with you and be ready for anything. Lowery (Major, Battalion Executive Officer), will give you the order of march and the administrative details". The order of march was to be: Platoon 36th Reconnaissance Troop, 1st platoon of Company C on the platoon of (15) Personal knowledge; (16) A-3, Personal knowledge; (17) A-4, Personal knowledge.

tanks, the remainder of C Company on foot, A Company, Battalion Command Group, B Company and D Company. The Battalion Headquarters Company was to move by bounds in rear of the column. Radios were to be opened immediately. The march was to be a column on each side of the road. Terrain maps of one over twenty-five thousands of the area north of Wissembourg were issued. (18)

Major General John E. Dahlquist, then Division Commander of the 36th Infantry Division arrived at the Battalion Command Post just as the Battalion officers were leaving after receiving the Battalion order. He was overheard by the company commanders to say: "We have got them on the run. Patton's forces have broken through and the enemy's communications are disrupted. We have got to push them before they can get organized". (19)

The 1st Battalion reached the border of Germany at about 1500 hours, 19 March 1945, three kilometers north of Wissembourg. It was a thrilling moment as the column passed under the masonry archway over the highway, knowing that the 1st Battalion, 143d Infantry was the first unit of the Division to be on actual German soil. This was a great morale booster. One could hear and notice the difference in tone of the conversations down the column. (20)

Company B was marching as light as possible. All but one bandolier of ammunition had been picked up from the rifle men in Wissembourg. The mortars and machine guns were on the weapons carriers which were following immediately behind the weapons platoon on the rear of the column. The truck with blanket rolls had not had a chance to catch up with the company since leaving Mertzwiller on 17 March. The company (18) Personal knowledge; (19) Personal knowledge; (20) A-3, Personal knowledge.

was carrying its normal combat rations; one-third G-Ration and one-third K-ration, supplemented with a half pound of coffee and a can of evaporated milk for every three men. The morale was as high as the company commander had ever seen it. The men of Company B knew that this was the beginning of the end. (21)

The company had made one serious mistake prior to the initial attack and that was about twenty-five percent of the men still had the winter shoe-packs that were issued during the winter in the mountains. The men could be seen hobbling along with sore feet and heard complaining of their shoes. It is believed that some casualties occurred to the company at a very critical time due to this mistake. (22)

The column passed through Schweigen and Rechtenbach. (See Map C). These towns were not defended and the few civilians there had white flags hanging from the windows, although they were not pleased to see the Americans. (23)

It was a clear spring day, the sun was shining and the rolling country and the plowed fields would make one think of a typical spring day in the States. (24)

THE ATTACK ON OBER-OTTERBACH

The Reconnaissance platoon and the tank platoon drove into Ober-Otterbach but soon after the first vehicles entered the town, they were met with a hail of machine gun fire and self-propelled fire from the heights just north of the town. This was the Siegfried Line! The first elements of the 1st Battalion had contacted the enemy at 1600 hours, 19 March, 1945. The civilians in Ober-Otterbach had been

(21) Personal knowledge; (22) Personal Knowledge; (23) A-4, Personal knowledge; (24) Personal knowledge.

completely evacuated. The tanks pulled back and supported C and A companies by fire. Company A left the road and deployed to the left while Company C continued up the road into the town. The Germans had the town registered with artillery and as soon as our lead elements entered, they fired a strong barrage which caught C company just at the outskirts of the town. (25)

B Company Commander ordered the platoons to take their ammunition from the carriers and the weapons platoon to remove it's equipment and weapons also. As this was being done, the Germans threw a heavy Nebelwerfer barrage (German heavy rocket) onto the column. The weapons platoon leader was hit by a piece of shrapnel in the foot and had to be evacuated.

The company dug in in the fields on the right of the road.

Company A was sent down the left side of the road into the town; a two-hour fire-fight followed and C company was cut down to about half strength. (26)

Company D and the remainder of the column had drawn back into Rechtenbach to gain cover from the Nebelwerfer barrages which were now falling intermittently along the road from Rechtenbach to Ober-Otterbach. (27) (See Map C)

At 1800 hours, B Company Commander received a radio message from the Battalion Commander to move his company into the east portion of Ober-Otterbach. The Company Commander went forward and reconnoitered a route into the town. The company could move to the right of the road about 300 yards and be masked from enemy observation until it could get within a hundred yards of the first houses on the outskirts of the town. The company deployed each platoon in

(25) A-1, p. 712; A-4; Personal knowledge; (26) Personal knowledge;
(27) Personal knowledge.

a wedge formation. Due to the narrow draw that the company was to go through, it moved out in a company column with an order: 1st, 3d Weapons and 2d platoons. Lieutenant William O. Repke, the company executive officer, had taken command of the first platoon. The move was completed in order and upon reaching the town, the company commander received another order from the battalion commander to move the company across to the west side of town and clear about twenty houses of some Germans who were firing into the flanks of A company in the center of town. (28)

The little town of Ober-Otterbach was taking a terrific pounding from German artillery. (29) A number of prisoners who had been taken by Company C, reported that they had orders to stay in the town to the last man. This seemed strange as the pillboxes in the Siegfried Line could be seen overlooking the town less than 200 yards away and it seemed they should be manning them. (30)

Company B moved across town in column, taking cover of the buildings and by rushes through the back yards. Soon after it had crossed the road through the center of town, the company commander met the battalion commander who said, "we have had orders from Regiment to clear the town and hold for the night; the second battalion is going to attack immediately just west of the town and try to get through the Line". The company continued on and by the time the company commander had moved up to it, the company had occupied the houses along the most west road of the town without resistance. (31) (See Map C)

As soon as the houses were occupied, the Germans fired automatic small arms from the pillboxes above the houses. This restricted

(28) Personal knowledge; (29) A-1, p. 712, Personal knowledge;
(30) Personal knowledge; (31) Personal knowledge.

free movement in the road as five of the houses were on fire and even though darkness was closing in, the Germans had excellent observation over B Company's area from the light of the burning houses. (32)

There was one gap of about 100 yards in the line of houses along the road. Beyond this gap was a group of about six houses, (see Map C), where the first platoon had a squad. The company commander did not feel that the squad was sufficient so he ordered the 2d platoon with the machine gun section attached to move through the company and garrison the houses beyond the gap. This let the first squad of 1st platoon move back across the gap. The company was then reorganized in the houses along the road in this order from West to East: The 2d platoon, 1st platoon, Headquarters Group, Mortar Section and the 3d platoon. (33)

Wire was installed as soon as the reorganization was completed and then sound power telephones were in to all platoons. As this was going on, the battalion installed the EE-8 field telephone from battalion in the company command post. (34)

No casualties had occurred to B Company while moving into town. The company, believing that it was going to stay in the town for the night, was in good spirits. The blanket-rolls had reached the battalion and carrying parties from Company B were sent back to the outskirts of the town to bring blanket-rolls, a bag of clean socks, rations and water to the company. (35)

The small arms fire from the Siegfried Line and the artillery had ceased and everything was quiet except for the crackling of the burning houses and the noise caused by walls and roofs falling. It was a cool, clear spring night with the moon casting shadows over the burning town. (36)

(32), (33), (34), (35), (36) Personal knowledge.

The company organized sentry posts along the road of houses for the night. One half of the company was to stay awake on guard while the other half slept. (37)

THE FIRST ATTACK ON THE SIEGFRIED LINE

At 2200 hours, 19 March, 1945, the company commander received a telephone message from the Battalion S-3 to assemble the company on the eastern side of town on the continuation of the East-West road. (See Map D), and be prepared to attack. The company commander tried to learn what the mission or plan was, but he was cut off from the conversation. (38)

It took nearly an hour to assemble the company and get it ready to move. The movement was restricted because as the men left the houses, the Germans again fired from the pillboxes into the houses. As the 2d platoon was moving out, a messenger from Company Headquarters was wounded by a sniper and shortly thereafter, the 2d platoon leader was wounded in the arm; it is believed by the same sniper. (39)

The following hour was a period of utter confusion. The company moved across town, crawling over and under debris, wire and fences, and the men continually wanting to know, "what in hell is going on". The company commander was at a loss for words as he did not know himself. As Company B reached the sector that was designated for the assembly, it found Company A in the same sector. To let the company close up would have placed about 300 men in a road about a hundred yards in depth. The company commander halted B Company which was now spread out in column across the town. (40)

At about 2330 hours, the Battalion Commander met B Company commander and gave him the following order: "The 141st Infantry has con- (37), (38), (39), (40) Personal knowledge.

tact with us on our right. We are to try an attack through the dragons teeth with A and B Companies and the platoon of tanks. A Company will lead out with the tanks and you follow in column". The Battalion Commander did not designate a route as it is believed that he did not know just where he would make the attack, however this is entirely an assumption on the author's part. (41)

The Company Commander had time to make a map reconnaissance of the area. It showed all flat land with the usual sunken field roads, running perpendicular to the Siegfried Line. (See Map D). The Line itself had not been reconnoitered but the Map showed it to have a staggered column of three rows of dragon teeth (cement triangular blocks about three feet high). (42)

The platoon leaders were called forward and given the situation and the following instructions by the Company Commander. "We don't know if the dragons teeth are defended. The 141st has contact on our right and the 2d battalion is attacking on the left. We are to follow Company A out in column and attack to the left into the dragons teeth from a point somewhere down this road which we are now on. The tanks are moving out with Company A. Company C is remaining in town. We will move out in the same order as we are now in; have your men pile their bedrolls in platoon piles and leave a guard with them. I will be at the head of the column and will give you orders by 536 radio". (43)

The tanks moved up through the column and the men shuddered to think of the artillery they would probably draw. Company A moved out and Company B followed. The formation moved about 300 yards east on the road when the tanks could be heard pulling out into the field (41), (42) (43) Personal knowledge.

north of the road. The formation continued on and soon B Company Commander met the Battalion Commander coming back down the road who said, "I have sent two platoons of A Company and three tanks out across the field". He had just said this when two German flares went up over the field to the left. Company B was in the sunken road and immediately they started to dig into the fertile banks along the sides. The tanks could be seen very plainly silhouetted on the field. The Battalion Commander left and went forward up the column. The tanks started to move forward again but this time they drew fire from an estimated eight German machine guns, to their front. The tanks could be heard coming back across the field. (44)

The Battalion Commander again came running down the road and gave B Company Commander the following order: "Move your company back into it's original position in town - Regiment has called the attack off - get them out of here before they get artillery on us". (45)

The Company Commander notified the platoon leaders by 536 radio and ordered them to withdraw under individual platoon control. It was a hasty withdrawal. The Company Commander ran all the way back to the town but he never caught the rear of his company until he reached the buildings in the town. Company A followed Company B in exactly the same manner and the tanks followed at the rear of the column. The move was completed at exactly the right time as the anticipated artillery barrage hit the field just as the rear elements of Company A cleared into the town. (46)

Company B, upon reaching it's original position on the west side of town at about 0200, 20 March 1945, had a check for casualties (44), (45), (46) Personal knowledge.

and missing. None were found. It was a relief to know that the withdrawal was completed in good order after such a brief and loose order was given for it. (47)

American small arms fire could be heard in the hills above to the northwest of the company's position about 500 yards away (See Map D). The 2d Battalion attack was going well, but slowly. At about 0400 hours, two men from the 2d Battalion came into B Company's position with eight prisoners. Sometime during the night, a forward detachment from the 2d Battalion aid station had installed a forward aid station in one of the houses in the 2d platoon area and was routing its wounded through the 2d platoon's position. (48)

20 MARCH, 1945 AT OBER-OTTERBACH

The 20 March, 1945 gave Company B the rest it had been needing for the past four days. The company stayed in position and the men cleaned their weapons and had a chance to wash and get themselves cleaned up a bit. (49)

At 1000 hours the Company Commanders were called to the Battalion Command Post which was located in a large house on the main highway from Wissembourg on the south side of town. Lieutenant Colonel Minor informed the Company Commanders that the 1st Battalion had become Regimental reserve and that the 3d Battalion had attacked somewhere to the west of the 2d Battalion, that the 1st Battalion would be prepared to exploit any break-through made by either the 2d or 3d Battalions. The men were to get as much rest as possible and to replenish any shortages of ammunition and equipment. (50).

The day was quiet with only intermittent mortar concentrations (47), (48) Personal knowledge; (49) A-4, Personal knowledge; (50) Personal knowledge.

falling on the town, although the attack of the 2d Battalion raged less than a thousand yards away and there was a continual flow of wounded and prisoners coming through B Company's area all day. (51)

Night closed in and everyone hoped for a chance to remain in the comfortable, though crowded, houses for the night. (52)

CLIMBING TO THE THIRD BATTALION

At about 2100 hours, 20 March, the Company Commanders were called to the Command Post to receive an attack order. (53)

Lt. Col. Minor informed the Company Commanders that the 3d Battalion had attacked the Siegfried Line at Grassberg (See Map E) and had been successful in achieving surprise. The 3d Battalion had made a penetration of unknown depth, but had suffered heavy casualties and was practically out of ammunition. The 1st Battalion was to move up the draw immediately in front of the Siegfried Line (See Map E) and continue the attack through the 3d Battalion. It would be a most precarious move as the draw was directly in front of the Siegfried Line and any detection by the Germans of the movement in the draw was sure to bring artillery onto the Battalion and the column would be within effective range of small arms fire all of the way. Complete silence and stealth was the only method by which the move could be successfully accomplished. (54)

The weather was favorable for the move as the skies had clouded over and it was a very dark night.

The order of march of the Battalion would be: Companies B, A, Headquarters, D and C. Companies A and B were to have a platoon of machine guns attached from Company D. Company B was to notify Batta- (51) A-4, Personal knowledge; (52), (53) Personal knowledge; (54) A-4, Personal knowledge.

lion when it was ready to move and then move out on order from Battalion. (55)

It was made very clear to the Company Commanders that Colonel George E. Lynch, 142d Infantry Regimental Commander, expected this to be the final attack and the breach of the Siegfried Line. (56)

Anti-tank Company and the Intelligence and Reconnaissance platoon which were to be employed as a Rifle Company were on their way to relieve the 1st Battalion as Regimental reserve and to hold the town of Ober-Otterbach. (57)

B Company Commander was informed at the Battalion Command Post that the 3d platoon leader, 1st Lieutenant Robert G. Futtrell, had orders there to return to the Zone of Interior on rotation. The Battalion Commander indicated that if the Company Commander so wished, he could withhold the orders until after the attack. The Company Commander did not desire to do so. However, this left the Company extremely short of officers as the only officers now remaining were Lieutenant William O. Repke, the Company Executive Officer who was now acting as the 1st platoon leader, and the Company Commander. The other officers had been wounded and evacuated in previous phases of the operation. (58)

The Company Commander had a very able assistant in the Artillery Forward Observer, 1st Lieutenant John W. Smith, who had been attached to Company B throughout the operation. This officer was capable of performing his duties as Artillery Forward Observer and also was an able tactical commander. He relieved the Company Commander many times of administrative details. (59)

(55), (56) Personal knowledge; (57) A-4, Statement of Colonel George E. Lynch, then Commander 142d Infantry, 36 Division on 10 January, 1949; (58), (59) Personal knowledge.

2nd Platoon?

The platoon leaders were called to the Company Command Post to receive the order and in the meantime a machine gun platoon leader from Company D, 1st Lieutenant William D. Lewis, arrived at the Company Command Post with his platoon. The Company Commander assembled the officers, the platoon sergeants, platoon guides, First Sergeant and the communication Sergeant in the cellar of the Command Post to hear the order. He informed them of the mission and the route. The formation for the march was to be: Company column in order: 2d Platoon, Company Headquarters, Machine Gun platoon, Mortar Section and the 1st platoon with Light Machine Gun Section attached. There was to be absolute silence during the march and light discipline was to be observed. (60)

The platoon Sergeants recommended that the basic load of ammunition be increased from two bandoliers to at least three for the riflemen. The Company Commander concurred with this and Lieutenant Lewis agreed to increase his machine gun ammunition. Each man was to carry at least five fragmentation grenades. This additional weight was a burden on the men for the march, but having the extra ammunition seemed to give them more confidence. (61)

The blanket-rolls were piled at Company Command Post and the 536 radios were checked. Each radio operator was carrying two extra batteries and there was an extra S.C.R. 300 radio battery to be carried by the Company Command Group. Each squad leader had a sound power telephone and each platoon had an RE-8 field telephone and a reel of WD 11D wire. (62)

The platoons reported to the Company Commander as soon as they were ready to march and the Company Commander notified Battalion by (60), (61), (62) Personal knowledge.

radio. (63)

Lieutenant Colonel Minor informed the Company Commander that he would march at the head of the column and to await his arrival before moving out. (64)

At about 2300 hours, 20 March 1945, the Battalion moved out of Ober-Otterbach, moving along the west continuation of the East-West road through the town. (See Map E). After marching for about 500 yards the road came to a dead end and the route continued on a wagon trail west through the draw. (65)

A squad from the 2d platoon had been sent out to precede the column by about 50 yards for security purposes. (66)

The march was slow and it was imperative that contact be maintained. The men were loaded heavily and there were fallen trees and rocks along the trail which made walking difficult. (67)

After the Battalion had moved about one mile, Lieutenant Colonel Minor thought he might have passed the place selected to turn north up the steep ridge to the 3d Battalion's position. Soon after, word came up the column - "there are six men from the 3d Battalion in the column". The men later were identified to be a carrying party with ammunition and water for the 3d Battalion. The Sergeant in charge of the party agreed to guide the Battalion into the position. (68)

The night was quiet and discipline along the column was excellent. Not a sound could be heard except for an occasional rattle of an ammunition box over the rocks. Everyone seemed to realize the danger that was only a stone's throw away.

The column turned north, pulling and dragging itself up the steep banks. (See Map E). After moving about 100 yards, it came

(63), (64) Personal knowledge; (65) A-4, Personal knowledge; (66) (67), (68) Personal knowledge.

upon the first obstacle of the Siegfried Line. The Germans had felled the trees about a hundred yards in front of the Line and had created an obstacle of about 100 yards in depth, running parallel to the front of the line. The mountains at this point were extremely wooded and this ingenious obstacle was very effective against Infantry. It was virtually impossible to crawl under or through the limbs. The only course was to go over the top. It is estimated that it took the 1st Battalion two hours to get through this barrier. (69)

The next obstacle encountered was a tangle of barbed wire, which did not appear to have any pattern. It was just tied to trees and strewn haphazardly across the front for a depth of about ten yards. This obstacle had been cut by the 3d Battalion and did not delay the column. (70)

After moving about another fifty yards the head of the column came upon the first pillbox (Box #1, (See Map E)). It was surrounded by a trench about waist deep. Men of the 3d Battalion could be seen in the trenches throughout the area. They proved to be Headquarters Company of the 3d Battalion. (71)

The 3d Battalion Commander, Lt. Col. Everett S. Simpson, met Lt. Col. Minor outside the pillbox and informed Lt. Col. Minor that he had guides there to move the 1st Battalion Companies into position. (72)

A guide from Company K was there to guide Company B into its position. The Company Commander ordered Lt. Repke to take the Company into position as the Company Commander had been ordered by Lt. Col. Minor to remain at the 3d Battalion Command Post (See Map E), until the Battalion had closed in the area. (73)

(69), (70), (71), (72), (73) Personal knowledge.

After the last Company had arrived in the area, Lt. Col. Minor gave instructions to the Company Commanders to form their companies in attack formation and as soon as he could coordinate with the 3d Battalion, they would attack and cut the transverse supply road immediately in rear of this portion of the Siegfried Line. (See Map B). It was now about 0400 hours, 31 March 1945.

The Battalion closed into the area and the companies were dispersed in the trenches throughout the 3d Battalion area. Company B moved into K Company's position and found the Company had three large pillboxes (boxes Nos. 2, 3, and 4), within it's area. The pillboxes in this sector were of a round type about thirty feet in diameter and about twelve feet high; large enough to hold a rifle platoon. The men of Company B dropped into the trenches and most of them had a chance to get a few minutes sleep.

Lt. Col. Minor gave the Company Commanders instructions for the attack. It was learned from the 3d Battalion that probably four or five pillboxes remained to be cleared before the Line could be breached. The enemy situation was not known, although German snipers had been firing into the area during the night from trenches about fifty yards in front of the Battalion. Company B was to attack on the right through Company K and Company A on the left through Company L. The Battalion would jump off at 0700 hours, with the mission of cutting the road at the rear of the Line. (74) (See Map B).

The B Company Commander went forward to his Company. It was necessary to go to each platoon position and give the instructions to individual platoon leaders. It was a very brief order. Each platoon was to form in a wedge and assault from its present position.

(74) Personal knowledge.

If any enemy fire was encountered at short range, every man was to fire from the hip and keep moving forward. The 3d platoon was to be on the right; the 2d on the left; the 1st in support behind the 3d. The Mortar Section and Company Headquarters were to remain in place. The Machine Gun platoon was to support the attack by fire from positions in rear of pillbox 2. The Light Machine Gun Section was to remain attached to the 1st platoon and protect the open right flank. There was no mention of keeping contact with Company A on the left. (75)

It so happened that the formation caused little movement in the trenches prior to the attack. By coincidence, Lieutenant Repke had assigned platoon areas that would just about fit the attack formation. (76)

Company B jumped off at 0700 hours, 21 March 1945. The lead squads had just cleared the trenches when a German machine gun fired into the left front of the formation. The ground at this point fell off as the Company had cleared the top of the ridge and the German bullets cracked in the trees above the men. The German machine gun was answered with a hail of rifle fire from Company B.

Every man was out of the trenches now moving forward and the lead squad of the 2d platoon had taken six prisoners and killed two Germans at the machine gun position, outside of pillbox 7. The Company was still moving and again a pair of machine pistols fired into the right flank of the 3d platoon. This caused return fire to be delivered by the 3d and 1st platoons to the right front of the Company. (77) (See Map E).

The platoon sergeant of the 3d platoon, Technical Sergeant

(75), (76) Personal knowledge; (77) Statement of Technical Sergeant Frank Middleton, Squad Sergeant of 3d Platoon, B Company, on 27 January, 1949, Personal knowledge.

Jesse J. Doering, ordered his platoon to assault to the right front. The platoon overran two pillboxes (5 and 6), and found about ten Germans huddled in each, offering no resistance. Three or four of the prisoners in pillbox 6 were wounded by the rifle fire from the 3d and 1st platoons. (78)

The Company Commander ordered the 1st platoon to pass through the 3d and dig in on the north slope of the ridge on the north side of the road. (See Map E). The movement by the 1st platoon was accomplished. The Light Machine Gun section moved into pillbox No. 6 and covered the approach up the road from the East.

The Company Commander had just reported to Battalion by radio that the Company was astride the road when a terrific barrage of Nebelwerfers (lasting approximately 10 minutes), hit along the road in the direct center of the company. The 1st platoon was caught under the trees and suffered the most with two men killed and four badly wounded. The remainder of the company was able to take cover in the pillboxes or in the trenches around them. (79)

Company A, attacking on the left had not progressed from its assembly position. As the company attempted to move out, a machine gun in pillbox no. 9, halted its attack. The Company was never able to take the box and it was finally by-passed and later in the day it was surrounded and cut off. Not until then did the Germans occupying pillbox no. 9 surrender. (80)

Lt. Col. Minor informed B Company Commander to remain in position until A Company could capture pillboxes nos. 9 and 10 and move onto the road. It was now about 0830 hours. (81)

B Company Artillery Observer had registered his artillery along (78), (79), (80), (81) Personal knowledge.

the draw to the front and German movement could be detected along the next ridge. Our Artillery was being fired along the ridge and into the town of Dorrenbach. (82) (See Map E)

The south side of the ridge to the front could be seen and there was another barrier of trees along its side similar to the one the Company had crawled over the night before. During the day about six Germans infiltrated into B Company's position and surrendered. They reported that about fifty Germans were on the reverse slope of the ridge to the front. (83) (See Map E)

THE ATTACK INTO DORRENBACH

At about 1500 hours, B Company Commander received instructions from Lt. Col. Minor to continue the attack and seize Dorrenbach. The Battalion plan was not explained at this time. (84)

The Company Commander instructed the 1st and 2d platoons to infiltrate by squads down into the draw and to cross the tree barrier to their front. The Machine Gun platoon was to move to pillbox No. 7 and support the attack on the ridge by fire. The 3d platoon was to follow the 1st and the Light Machine Gun section was to remain in place and protect the right flank of the company by fire. (85) (See Map E)

The move across the tree barrier was completed by about 1600 and the attack formation was arranged with 2d platoon on the left and 1st on the right, in platoon wedges. The 3d platoon was in physical contact with the rear of the 1st platoon and Company Headquarters was following the 2d platoon in column. (86)

After the quick success in the pillboxes, the platoon leaders (82), (83), (84), (85), (86) Personal knowledge.

wanted to use the same tactics for this attack and the Company Commander agreed. As soon as enemy contact was made, every man would fire and the assault would be automatic. (87)

The company moved up the ridge at about 1630 hours and was met by a couple of ineffective bursts of machine pistol fire. The assault began and the Germans ^{tried} to surrender, but as soon as one would get onto his feet, he was cut down by the intense rifle fire. Some Germans were able to surrender however and they were coming back through the rifle platoons with their hands on their heads. The rifle platoons did not bother to dispatch guards for them as they were intent upon reaching Dorrenbach and the houses. It was a strange sight and for a moment at this point, it was hard to control the attack. As the men were moving forward the Germans were trying to move to the rear of the formation without being shot. The reports of prisoners taken during the morning were found to be approximately correct as thirty more prisoners were taken off the ridge by B Company and it is estimated that about ten or twelve were killed or wounded and left on the ridge. (88)

The attack had been preceded by a battalion barrage of artillery, requested by the B Company Forward Observer. The attack had progressed so rapidly that the forward elements of the 1st platoon were now almost to the barrage. Lieutenant Smith radioed the fire direction center to stop the barrage. At this point company control was lost; the 2d platoon seeing the roofs of the houses in Dorrenbach at the foot of the next draw broke into a run. The 1st platoon pulled around in back of them and the town was entered by the company in column. The barrage was still falling on the ridge above the town (87), (88) Personal knowledge.

when the company closed in the houses. (89)

The men surged through the little town and a German wagon train of supplies and equipment was seized on the main road of the town. The Germans offered no resistance and it was found that several German kitchen crews and supply personnel were in the town. As the riflemen would enter the houses, Germans would come out and surrender. Approximately 100 prisoners were taken in the mad rush into Dorrenbach. (90)

The Company was reorganized and by 1800 hours, Company C had closed into the town over the same route used by Company B in the attack. The hills around the town were registered with artillery fire by Lieutenant Smith. The company garrisoned the houses on the outskirts of the town and prepared to defend the town. (91)

The Battalion Commander and the remainder of the Battalion moved into the town about an hour later. Two platoons of Company A had been placed on the flanks of the route into town to protect it. (92)

The Germans continued to pound Dorrenbach throughout the night with artillery and mortars, but no counterattacks or enemy action other than the shelling was experienced. (93)

About 0900 hours, 22 March 1945, the 3d Battalion of the 143d Infantry moved through Dorrenbach to exploit the break-through, thusly the 148d Infantry had breached the Siegfried Line. (94)

ANALYSIS AND CRITICISM

To look back over the operation: The most outstanding observation on the writer's part is the amount of physical endurance re-

(89) A-4, Personal knowledge; (90), (91) Personal knowledge; (92) A-4, Personal knowledge; (93) A-4, Personal knowledge; (94) A-3, A-4, A-6.

quired of an Infantryman in an operation of this type. The men of Company B, after a severe two day battle in Mertzwiller, were required to march some 25 miles through delaying actions and continue the attack into the Siegfried Line. The need for speed in the operation prevented rest or relief. It cannot be seen how this strain could have been prevented without additional troops.

The failure on the Company Commander's part to equip his men properly for the attack and provide proper shoes caused much suffering that should have been foreseen and avoided. Suitable shoes could have been made available if they had been requested from Regiment.

The night attack into the dragons teeth of the Siegfried Line was not an operation which Company B could be proud of. The instructions received from the Battalion S-3 left the whole attack in a haze of uncertainty. If the attack was to succeed, the tanks were to play a vital part in preventing it. The tanks could be heard moving for miles and the presence of a brass band could not have caused more attention from the Germans. The Company B Commander can be thankful that he had a fine group of non-commissioned officers with him because the order for the withdrawal from the dragons teeth was a hasty and incomplete one and it was the aggressive action on the part of the non-commissioned officers that prevented the company from being disorganized. However, neither A nor B Companies suffered casualties; the reason being the speed by which the withdrawal was completed.

The movement to the 3d Battalion's position was a planned, well coordinated move. The attack through the 3d Battalion was a very hastily planned attack, but Company B knew what it was to do and did it.

The decision of the Regimental Commander, Colonel George E. Lynch,

as to the selection of the route to the 3d Battalion at Grassberg, was an aggressive and risky one. Speed was of the essence. Any other route would have been too long to permit success.

It is not believed that Company B could have made the bold frontal assaults that it did on the 21 March 1945 against well organized and disciplined troops. The Germans opposing the 1st Battalion, 142d Infantry were not up to the standard of German troops encountered in the early part of the war. However, it is believed that the tactics used were appropriate and that the method of assault used saved casualties and allowed the men to use their fire power.

Company A's failure to take pillbox No. 9 delayed the advance by about six hours. Had the Battalion Commander ordered Company B to make a flanking attack on the box, it is believed the box could have been taken. Had contact been maintained between A and B Companies, the box would have quickly been surrounded and eliminated.

It is noted that Company B did not have any Engineers attached for the operation. Events proved that they would have been of no benefit under the circumstances. However, it was lucky they were not needed since they were not there.

Artillery support was an important factor in the attack at Grassberg. The close coordination of the Artillery Forward Observer and the Company Commander was of untold benefit to the Company. The shifting of the barrage above Dorrenbach could not have been performed without this coordination as the attack was moving so fast.

Had the Germans covered the fallen tree barriers with small arms fire or artillery, they would have increased their effectiveness greatly and would have delayed the 1st Battalion's relatively quick victory.

To look over the score of the operation: Company B, 142d Infantry had smashed the Siegfried Line and had made the final break which allowed the 36th Division to continue on it's mission into the Rhine Plains. The company had taken between 100 and 150 prisoners and had killed fifteen or more Germans. The company received casualties of two men killed, two officers and six enlisted men wounded.

The Regimental Commander of the 142d Infantry, Colonel George E. Lynch (now on the General Staff of Army Field Forces), wrote this about the B Company attack in Dorrenbach. "The action of Company B 21 March 1945, in fighting through the Siegfried Line to Dorrenbach was an inspired one in which the combination of company esprit, coolness and daring overcame all obstacles with incredible speed".
(95)

By War Department General Order, Number 37, 1946, the 142d Infantry was cited for outstanding performance of duty in action at the Siegfried Line, Wissembourg-Dorrenbach area.

LESSONS

Some of the lessons emphasized by this operation are:

R.W.
1. To achieve success in an attack, it is necessary that an understood plan, though it may be brief, be given to every member in the organization.

*good thought
PW*
2. Reserve unit commanders should make continuous reconnaissance in the attack and have tentative plans prepared to put to work upon commitment.

3. Employing the maximum amount of fire by every weapon in the rifle company during the assault, will lessen casualties and

(95) Statement of Colonel George E. Lynch, then Commander of 142d Infantry, 36th Division, on 10 January, 1949.

speed the attack.

4. Firing from the hip, by the riflemen, in the general direction of the enemy, will keep the enemy pinned to the ground, allowing the assault to move forward.

5. It is imperative that prior to an attack, the Company Commander consider every eventuality in regard to clothing and equipment.

6. Loss of key personnel and officers is to be expected. Training of non-commissioned officers to fill vacancies should be planned for in a training program.

7. The value of the M1 rifle and its fire power should be instilled in every Infantryman.

8. Anticipated ammunition and supply requirements should never be overlooked, even at platoon and squad levels.

9. Personnel from supporting arms should, prior to an operation, be acquainted with the members of the organization, personalities and procedures of the organization which they are supporting.

10. Dense fallen trees can be an effective obstacle to Infantry if covered with small arms or artillery fire.

11. Loss of complete company control can be expected for short intervals during a fast moving attack. Initiative and command must be expected of platoon leaders and non-commissioned officers.

12. Speed is a vital factor in an Infantry attack. Immediate decisions must be made and any method to speed the attack must be anticipated.

13. The use of tanks in a night attack will decrease the element of surprise and permit the enemy to detect movement.